

Sermon April 13th 2008 –

Be a good Shepherd:

Good morning fellow sheep. Good looking sheep for sure, cute and cuddly, and God's flock to boot or at least I hope so.

Now I have not gone balmy for I can see quite well that you are people and not woolly sheep? However the bible says in Isaiah 53:6 that we are all like sheep and have gone astray plus there are many other references to God's people as sheep in the bible, and our gospel reading today has Jesus saying that he is the Good Shepherd who looks after his sheep, so if we belong to Jesus that puts us in the sheep category.

So what do we know about sheep, most of us not much, unless you were a sheep farmer? However we do know that they can be cute and cuddly, they hang around in mobs, they know when to run from strangers and danger, they provide wool for us to cloth ourselves, yet they are quite defenseless and can easily fall prey to the environment around them, the heat or cold, and attacks by wild animals. Especially if they wander off on their own.

This nice image of sheep pales a bit when you think they can also end up on a dinner plate or as leather clothing. Whilst I can relate to being in the flock and the cute and cuddly part especially the cuddly, I can't see myself as the Sunday roast.

So once again why sheep? Well the setting of the story is a Pastoral one and the culture of the time made motifs of sheep and shepherding an ideal description of human and divine roles and relationships. Australian society is said to have received a great boost from the sheep's back so the motif is pertinent for us as well. This is revealed as the primary background for the Gospel references to the sheep and shepherd where Israel is the sheep and the promised King is the shepherd.

The Shepherd motif is of a figure who represented, faithfulness, compassion, guidance and protection. The figure of the Shepherd also was prophetic pointer of the Messiah. For Jesus not only displayed the characteristics of a good Shepherd, he also demonstrated the power of the Messiah who would shepherd God's people.

It shows in picture language that though we are people we too need a shepherd just like sheep.

King David in his Psalm 23 also uses this picture, so it from this tradition that Jesus draws his analogies plus also promoted the notion that the Disciples were also shepherds.

Since the people of God were like sheep without a shepherd, God provided them with one in the person of his Son, Jesus.

Jesus claims that he is the good shepherd who looks after his sheep – his people. God's people over the centuries had been endowed with many excellent shepherds – prophets and kings as well as some fairly bad ones – see kings 1 & 2 who had harmed his people – his flock.

So in using this analogy Jesus knows that his audience understands what he is getting at. The pen referred to in verses 1-6 would draw from the picture of the current practice where the sheep, at night were gathered together in an enclosure which had walls, up to 6 feet high around it and could contain many different flocks.

It was designed to keep predators, 4 & 2 legged varieties out and it only had one gate. The gatekeeper – not necessarily the shepherd, but in most cases it was, – would then stand guard at the entrance or even lie across the entrance and become the gate himself. This is still often the practice today in Middle Eastern regions.

Thus in the setting of the sheep pen the passage invites us to look at three images; the gate, the shepherd and the sheep.

In the first part of the picture Jesus is not the gatekeeper for the gatekeeper lets Jesus into the pen for he is the rightful leader of the sheep. He has the authority to call his own sheep from the pen. The sheep pen is said to represent Israel from which Jesus calls his followers, yet with Jesus the picture is larger than this and the pen from which he calls his flock is the wider world.

Then Jesus switches to the image of the gate through which the sheep – his sheep – enter the fold. So now not only is he the shepherd who looks after his sheep, he is the gate also that allows them in and keeps them safe from intruders, for those who enter without permission are robbers and thieves and not to be trusted. These robbers can be seen to represent false teachers of scripture etc or things of the world that draw people away from being in God's flock.

This seems to point to an endorsement of those who enter into leadership in Christ's name, leaders who come after him whom he knows. It also implies a warning to those who are illegitimate shepherds who try to get in falsely and whose entry Jesus has prevented. This is said to be directed at the Pharisees, but can also be seen as a warning to those called to leadership in God's Church today and that means all of us not just the clergy for we are all Disciples of Jesus and part of the priesthood of all believers. We are called to care for the flock/ the gathered people of God, to nurture them, feed them, water them, heal them and lead them to green pastures, especially the lambs.

The third point to Jesus' parable is that "seeing Jesus" is the Gate for the sheep also, only those sheep who find him will enter the sheepfold and find safety for they alone hear his voice. In John 14 verse 6 "I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the father except by me."

Those sheep that hear his voice and obey him will enter into his fold, his kingdom here on earth and in heaven and find peace and stability. The world is a dangerous place with many pitfalls and predators but it is the Good Shepherd that will lead us to green pastures and protect us. In verse 4 Jesus says that his sheep follow him because they know his voice. His sheep not his lambs, for the lambs learn from the older members of the flock and the shepherd.

Psalm 23 Verse 1: The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want - ..." and in Psalm 118 verse 20 we have a description of our gate of entry "this is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter."

Thus one of the main themes behind this parable and much of chapter 10 of John's gospel is the relationship between people and their leaders.

We note that in ancient times the religious leaders almost destroyed their country & religion by their adoption of the Hellenistic way of life and their rejection of God's way. However we see in this the possibility that some past and current leaders may not be worthy of our devotion and loyalty because they too have adopted the ways of society and watered down their effectiveness as preachers of the gospel message and failed as the Pharisees did to embrace Jesus as the true messiah.

Thus this failure of shepherd leaders both in the past and in current times to acknowledge the work of God in Christ puts into question the legitimacy of their leadership. Unfortunately through out church history we see many who have come into leadership of the people of God and who have fallen into sinful lifestyle – some of the early popes – or have come into the role with wrong motives or reasons and led people away from the fold instead of into it.

Whilst it seems that this is pointed at church leaders it goes beyond this for it refers to any voice who leads people away from God or inflicts harm to the people of God. Jesus calls them Robbers and Thieves and about whom we are to be wary.

The call to be a shepherd has is an honour which carries with it great responsibility and the litmus test for us is whether what we or other shepherds do lines up with the work and witness of Christ Jesus, As Jesus points out in his sheepfold image he is the only one by which his sheep will gain access.

Our story also points out that the sheep must hear his voice and respond. To hear him we who are his must be tuned into his voice through prayer, bible reading, meditation, so that we can hear him when he calls. If we don't then we can wander off on our own and fall prey to the dangers of the wild just as the sheep who wander off on his own.

Thus the story in John is really an allegory for the flock of Christ is the Church and is led by the Good Shepherd – Jesus – plus it is a warning to those Jesus has called to look after the flock in his absence to follow his example as well it is as an affirmation of the task. Jesus continues to tell us about himself and yet now he is warning us about the detractors who endanger the flock of God and points out that the merits of all other leaders must be measured against his leadership.

Jesus calls his flock from the sheep pen of the world system into the sheep fold of God's system, the fold that is the Kingdom of God.

Also what this story is telling is that the world is a tough place. It is like a desert, arid and dry and is a home for wild beasts – a place of moral traps and if we face this desert alone we could wander off and perish spiritually. This is something many here may have already experienced in their life journey, I know that I have and it was a scary place to be.

However Jesus is there as our Shepherd and he knows us each one for we are his. He has called us into his kingdom – those who have heard him – and he stands at the gate to protect us, but leads us out of the pen (The World) he will guide and lead us through the desert of life to good pasture. He as our Shepherd will provide for us.

Our Shepherd is skilled and courageous and if we are under his leadership, if we continue to recognise his voice – not yielding to temptation and enticements of false shepherds, then we will find safety and flourish in our faith.

So which shepherd do you follow, the shepherd of the world's ways – Satan? Or the true shepherd Jesus? Jesus is calling still, if you have not responded to his voice now would be a good time to do so and if you have tuned him out of your life or turned down the volume, now would be a good time to reconnect with him, for to delay may be dangerous and you could find yourself outside the sheep pen

A man dies and goes to heaven. Of course, St. Peter meets him at the pearly gates.

St. Peter says, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in."

"Okay," the man says, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart."

"That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "that's worth three points!"

"Three points?" he says. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithe and service."

"Terrific!" says St. Peter, "that's certainly worth a point."

"One point? Golly. How about this; I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans."

"Fantastic, that's good for two more points, " he says.

"TWO POINTS!!" the man cries, "At this rate the only way I'll get into heaven is by the grace of God!"

"Come on in!"

We only have Jesus as our shepherd through the Grace of God and his love for his people, all of them and Jesus the Good Shepherd is calling his people into his fold, to find peace in his kingdom, and if your still on the outside come on in, for he is also calling you to look after the flock he has for your care, i.e. family, work place, home group so they too may come into God's Kingdom. There are many chances to be in the fold and a good shepherd as modeled by Jesus - I prayer that you are listening.

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